

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
PROVISIONAL APPLICATION FOR PATENT

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TITLE: Determination and correction for laser induced CCD camera degradation

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BACKGROUND

1. Field of the Invention

The invention contains a process for the determination and correction of laser induced damages of the optical and electronic components within the beam path of a monitor module of a 193 nm or 157 nm excimer lasers.

2. Description of the Related Art

Excimer lasers emitting pulsed UV-radiation are becoming increasingly important instruments in specialized material processing. The KrF-excimer laser emitting around 248 nm and the ArF-excimer laser emitting around 193 nm are currently the light sources of choice for photolithographic processing of integrated circuit devices (IC's). The F2-laser is also being developed for such usage and emits light around 157 nm.

It is recognized herein that it is desired in the field of industrial silicon processing that each of the above laser systems become capable of emitting a narrow spectral band around a very precisely determined and finely adjustable wavelength. It is further recognized that it is desired to have techniques for reducing bandwidths by special resonator designs to less than 100 pm for semi-narrow band lasers, to less than 1 pm for narrow band lasers, and to less than

0.6 pm for very narrow band lasers. It is further recognized that it is desired to have techniques for tuning and controlling central wavelengths of emission.

The wavelength of the emitted laser radiation can be determined by an etalon spectrometer. The etalon spectrometer produces interference fringes which are projected onto a CCD line. From the interference fringes the wavelength can be calculated.

From experimental results it is known that optical components and measurement equipment like CCD lines can be damaged by the UV radiation of an excimer or molecular fluorine laser. This causes problems especially for the measurement equipment, because reliable performance information is necessary for the lithography production process.

CCD cameras which are presently used can show degradation under UV radiation. The present invention avoids the described difficulties by using a special correction of the sensitivity of each camera pixel.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1: Fringe system without correction

Figure 2: Fringe system with correction to the sensitivity of each camera pixel

Figure 3: Dark current of the coated camera before and after irradiation with 120 million pulses at 193 nm

Figure 4: Camera signal in response to flat field illumination before and after the irradiation test with a broadband ArF laser at 2 kHz

Figure 5: Camera signal of an uncoated model before and after irradiation with broadband 193 nm radiation at 2 kHz using a slit measured at gain 1

Figure 6: Flat field illumination of an uncoated camera after 120 million laser pulses with a broadband ArF laser at 2 kHz.

Figure 7: Overall excimer or molecular fluorine laser system

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

As above mentioned the laser radiation causes damages of the CCD lines during laser operation. Further some CCD lines have integrated optics or optics in front of the CCD line to project the interference fringes to the CCD line. The UV radiation can also damage the optics and wrong information is recorded by the CCD line. For the determination of the wavelength of the UV laser a monitor module is used which is an etalon spectrometer. The information of the interference fringes is used to control the bandwidth and to stabilize the wavelength of the laser radiation. The interference fringes produced by the etalon are projected onto a CCD line. It was shown that the sensitivity of the CCD line is lower on radiation exposed positions. So it is necessary to correct the sensitivity of the CCD line, because an electronic evaluation of the picture of the interference pattern is done. The degradation leads to wrong interpretations of the interference pattern, mainly the calculated bandwidth will be too high.

The invention describes a process how these degradations can be determined and how the interference pattern can be corrected. To achieve a pixel related camera sensitivity a special procedure has to be used. The wavelength is shifted in small steps until the wavelength shift has completed 1 FSR (free spectral range) of the etalon. The corresponding interference pattern after each wavelength shift is recorded by the CCD camera. After completing the shift the following calculations will be used to determine a sensitivity vector:

sum up all k determined interference pattern $C(i)$, i describes the pixel number (1-n) of the camera

$$R(i) = \sum_k C_k(i) \text{ (interference pattern)}$$

As a result an average interference pattern $R(i)$ is calculated which corresponds approximately to the response of a homogeneous illuminated CCD line.

2. The next step is the evaluation of the sensitivity S from this picture of each individual pixel i :

$$S(i) = \frac{R(i)}{\text{mean}(R(i))}; \quad \text{mean}(R(i)) = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n R(i)}{n}$$

Using this sensitivity vector S , each pixel can be corrected for its sensitivity during the calculation of the spectral parameters of the laser beam. This method does not require any hardware changes. It can be used also for any installed laser.

Figure 1 shows a typical fringe system of a commercial ArF laser without correction. The amplitudes of the individual interference peaks differ clearly. Additionally all peaks are not ideally symmetrical. Often they indicate artifacts, like shoulders or small signal failures in the wings.

Figure 2 shows the fringe system from figure 1 with correction, in the above described procedure. The amplitudes of the interference peaks differ only by a few per cent. At the same time the symmetry of the peaks rose.

In Figure 3 the dark current at different gains for a coated camera before and after irradiation with 120 million pulses by 193 nm radiation is shown. The experimental results are shown by the measurement points 31 and 32. There is only a slight difference in the dark current before and after irradiation of the camera. For gain 32 the experimental results are shown by the measurement

points 33 and 34. Also here only a slight difference in the dark current before and after irradiation can be observed.

In Figure 4 the camera signal in response to flat field illumination before and after the irradiation test with a broadband ArF laser at 2 kHz is shown. The gain for these measurements was 1. The measured values for the camera signal at the start are shown by the points 41. The points signed with 42 show the camera signal after irradiation with 120 million laser pulses. It can clearly be seen that the camera signal at irradiated areas is lower. For this camera a sensitivity loss of 65% was measured. The results show that the laser radiation has a strong influence on the camera sensitivity and that a correction of the camera sensitivity is necessary.

In Figure 5 the camera signal of an uncoated model before and after irradiation with broadband 193 nm radiation at 2 kHz is shown. Again a slit is used to cover parts of the camera from the laser radiation. The gain was again 1. Line 51 show the camera signal of a new camera. After 120 million laser pulses the signal is much lower as shown by line 52. After 120 million laser pulses the slit was moved and the signal of the camera again measured (line 53). Like expected the signal at this part of the camera is nearly equal to the signal of a new camera. The energy dosis was 16 times higher than for normal irradiation conditions. So accelerated tests were possible.

In Figure 6 the flat field illumination of an uncoated camera after 120 million laser pulses with a broadband ArF laser at 2 kHz is shown. A sensitivity loss of 83% for pixels which have been irradiated by 120 million laser pulses is observed.

In the case that one or several pixels of the camera are completely destroyed by the laser radiation an algorithm is used to calculate the sensitivity for those damaged pixels. The number of neighboring destroyed pixels should not be too high, if the results of this calculation should be reliable.

Prior to this invention either the whole monitor module or the CCD camera of the module had to be exchanged. The invention allows to increase the operation time of the module and camera without affecting the accuracy of the bandwidth and wavelength calculation. Thereby the uptime of the laser system will be increased.

OVERALL LASER SYSTEM

Figure 7 schematically illustrates an overall excimer or molecular fluorine laser system. Referring to Figure 7, a preferred excimer or molecular fluorine laser system is a DUV or VUV laser system, such as a KrF, ArF or molecular fluorine (F₂) laser system, for use with a deep ultraviolet (DUV) or vacuum ultraviolet (VUV) lithography system. Alternative configurations for laser systems for use in such other industrial applications as TFT annealing, photoablation and/or micromachining, e.g., include configurations understood by those skilled in the art as being similar to and/or modified from the system shown in Figure 7 to meet the requirements of that application. Alternative configurations for producing lithographic exposure radiation at EUV wavelengths (e.g., between 11 nm and 15 nm) may be described at United States patent applications no. 60/281,446 and 60/312,277, which are assigned to the same assignee as the present application, and at any of the multiple references cited in those applications, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference. Alternative DUV or VUV laser system and component configurations may be described at U.S. patent applications no. 09/317,695, 09/244,554, 09/452,353, 09/512,417, 09/599,130, 09/694,246, 09/712,877, 09/574,921, 09/738,849, 09/718,809, 09/629,256, 09/712,367, 09/771,366, 09/715,803, 09/738,849, 09/791,431, 60/204,095, 09/741,465, 09/574,921, 09/734,459, 09/741,465, 09/686,483, 09/584,420, 09/843,604, 09/780,120, 09/792,622, 09/791,431, 09/811,354, 09/838,715, 09/715,803, 09/717,757, 09/771,013, 09/791,430, 09/712,367 and 09/780,124, and U.S. patents no. 6,285,701, 6,005,880, 6,061,382, 6,020,723,

6,219,368, 6,212,214, 6,154,470, 6,157,662, 6,243,405, 6,243,406, 6,198,761, 5,946,337, 6,014,206, 6,157,662, 6,154,470, 6,160,831, 6,160,832, 5,559,816, 4,611,270, 5,761,236, 6,212,214, 6,243,405, 6,154,470, and 6,157,662, each of which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application and is hereby incorporated by reference.

DISCHARGE TUBE

The system shown in Figure 7 generally includes a laser chamber 102 (or laser tube including a heat exchanger and fan for circulating a gas mixture within the chamber 102 or tube) having a pair of main discharge electrodes 103 connected with a solid-state pulser module 104, and a gas handling module 106. The gas handling module 106 has a valve connection to the laser chamber 102 so that halogen, any active rare gases and a buffer gas or buffer gases, and optionally a gas additive, may be injected or filled into the laser chamber, preferably in premixed forms (see U.S. patent applications no. 09/513,025, 09/780,120, 09/734,459 and 09/447,882, which are assigned to the same assignee as the present application, and U.S. patents no. 4,977,573, 4,393,505 and 6,157,662, which are each hereby incorporated by reference. The solid-state pulser module 104 is powered by a high voltage power supply 108. A thyatron pulser module may alternatively be used. The laser chamber 102 is surrounded by optics module 110 and optics module 112, forming a resonator. The optics modules 110 and 112 may be controlled by an optics control module 114, or may be alternatively directly controlled by a computer or processor 116, particular when line-narrowing optics are included in one or both of the optics modules 110, 112, such as is preferred when KrF, ArF or F₂ lasers are used for optical lithography.

PROCESSOR CONTROL

The processor 116 for laser control receives various inputs and controls various operating parameters of the system. A diagnostic module 118 receives and measures one or more parameters, such as pulse energy, average energy and/or power, and preferably wavelength, of a split off portion of the main beam 120 via optics for deflecting a small portion 122 of the beam toward the module 118, such as preferably a beam splitter module 121. The beam 120 is preferably the laser output to an imaging system (not shown) and ultimately to a workpiece (also not shown) such as particularly for lithographic applications, and may be output directly to an application process. The laser control computer 116 may communicate through an interface 124 with a stepper/scanner computer, other control units 126, 128 and/or other external systems.

The processor or control computer 116 receives and processes values of some of the pulse shape, energy, ASE, energy stability, energy overshoot for burst mode operation, wavelength, spectral purity and/or bandwidth, among other input or output parameters of the laser system and output beam. The processor may receive signals corresponding to the wavefront compensation such as values of the bandwidth, and may control the wavefront compensation performed by the wavefront compensation optic 3, 13, 23 (see above) in a feedback loop by sending signals to adjust the pressure(s) and/or curvature(s) of surfaces associated with the wavefront compensation optic 3, 13, 23. The processor 116 also controls the line narrowing module to tune the wavelength and/or bandwidth or spectral purity, and controls the power supply and pulser module 104 and 108 to control preferably the moving average pulse power or energy, such that the energy dose at points on the workpiece is stabilized around a desired value. In addition, the computer 116 controls the gas handling module 106 which includes gas supply valves connected to various gas sources. Further functions of the processor 116 such as to provide overshoot control, energy stability control and/or to monitor input energy to the discharge, are described in more detail at U.S. patent application no. 09/588,561, which is assigned to the same assignee and is hereby incorporated by reference.

As shown in Figure 7, the processor 116 preferably communicates with the solid-state or thyatron pulser module 104 and HV power supply 108, separately or in combination, the gas handling module 106, the optics modules 110 and/or 112, the diagnostic module 118, and an interface 124. The laser resonator which surrounds the laser chamber 102 containing the laser gas mixture includes optics module 110 including line-narrowing optics for a line narrowed excimer or molecular fluorine laser, which may be replaced by a high reflectivity mirror or the like in a laser system wherein either line-narrowing is not desired, or if line narrowing is performed at the front optics module 112, or a spectral filter external to the resonator is used for narrowing the linewidth of the output beam.

SOLID STATE PULSER MODULE

The laser chamber 102 contains a laser gas mixture and includes one or more preionization units (not shown) in addition to the pair of main discharge electrodes 103. Preferred main electrodes 103 are described at U.S. patent application no. 09/453,670 for photolithographic applications, which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application and is hereby incorporated by reference, and may be alternatively configured, e.g., when a narrow discharge width is not preferred. Other electrode configurations are set forth at U.S. patents no. 5,729,565 and 4,860,300, each of which is assigned to the same assignee, and alternative embodiments are set forth at U.S. patents no. 4,691,322, 5,535,233 and 5,557,629, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference. Preferred preionization units may be sliding surface or corona-type and are described U.S. patent applications no. 09/922,241 and 09/532,276 (sliding surface) and 09/692,265 and 09/247,887 (corona discharge), each of which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application, and additional alternative embodiments are set forth at U.S. patents no. 5,337,330, 5,818,865, 5,875,207 and 5,991,324, and German Gebrauchsmuster DE 295 21

572 U1, all of the above patents and patent applications being hereby incorporated by reference.

The solid-state or thyatron pulser module 104 and high voltage power supply 108 supply electrical energy in compressed electrical pulses to the preionization and main electrodes 103 within the laser chamber 102 to energize the gas mixture. Components of the preferred pulser module and high voltage power supply are described above, and further details may be described at U.S. patent applications 09/640,595, 09/838,715, 60/204,095, 09/432,348 and 09/390,146, and U.S. patents no. 6,005,880, 6,226,307 and 6,020,723, each of which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application and which is hereby incorporated by reference into the present application. Other alternative pulser modules are described at U.S. patents no. 5,982,800, 5,982,795, 5,940,421, 5,914,974, 5,949,806, 5,936,988, 6,028,872, 6,151,346 and 5,729,562, each of which is hereby incorporated by reference.

RESONATOR, GENERAL

The laser resonator which surrounds the laser chamber 102 containing the laser gas mixture includes optics module 110 preferably including line-narrowing optics for a line narrowed excimer or molecular fluorine laser such as for photolithography, which may be replaced by a high reflectivity mirror or the like in a laser system wherein either line-narrowing is not desired (for TFT annealing, e.g.), or if line narrowing is performed at the front optics module 112, or a spectral filter external to the resonator is used, or if the line-narrowing optics are disposed in front of the HR mirror, for narrowing the bandwidth of the output beam. For an F₂-laser, optics for selecting one of multiple lines around 157 nm may be used, e.g., one or more dispersive prisms, birefringent plates or blocks and/or an interferometric device such as an etalon or a device having a pair of opposed, non-parallel plates such as described in the 09/715,803 and 60/280,398 applications, wherein the same optic or optics or an additional line-narrowing optic or optics for narrowing the selected line may be used. Also,

particularly for the F₂-laser, and also possibly for other excimer lasers, the total gas mixture pressure may be lower than conventional systems, e.g., lower than 3 bar, for producing the selected line at a narrow bandwidth such as 0.5 pm or less without using additional line-narrowing optics (see U.S. patent application no. 60/212,301, which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application and is hereby incorporated by reference).

The laser chamber 102 is sealed by windows transparent to the wavelengths of the emitted laser radiation 120. The windows may be Brewster windows or may be aligned at another angle, e.g., 5°, to the optical path of the resonating beam. One of the windows may also serve to output couple the beam or as a highly reflective resonator reflector on the opposite side of the chamber 102 as the beam is outcoupled.

DIAGNOSTIC MODULE

After a portion of the output beam 120 passes the outcoupler of the optics module 112, that output portion preferably impinges upon a beam splitter module 121 which includes optics for deflecting a portion 122 of the beam to the diagnostic module 118, or otherwise allowing a small portion 122 of the outcoupled beam to reach the diagnostic module 118, while a main beam portion 120 is allowed to continue as the output beam 120 of the laser system (see U.S. patent applications no. 09/771,013, 09/598,552, and 09/712,877 which are assigned to the same assignee as the present invention, and U.S. patent no. 4,611,270, each of which is hereby incorporated by reference. Preferred optics include a beamsplitter or otherwise partially reflecting surface optic. The optics may also include a mirror or beam splitter as a second reflecting optic. More than one beam splitter and/or HR mirror(s), and/or dichroic mirror(s) may be used to direct portions of the beam to components of the diagnostic module 118. A holographic beam sampler, transmission grating, partially transmissive reflection diffraction grating, grism, prism or other refractive, dispersive and/or transmissive optic or optics may also be used to separate a small beam portion from the main

beam 120 for detection at the diagnostic module 118, while allowing most of the main beam 120 to reach an application process directly or via an imaging system or otherwise. These optics or additional optics may be used to filter out visible radiation such as the red emission from atomic fluorine in the gas mixture from the split off beam prior to detection.

The output beam 120 may be transmitted at the beam splitter module while a reflected beam portion is directed at the diagnostic module 118, or the main beam 120 may be reflected, while a small portion is transmitted to the diagnostic module 118. The portion of the outcoupled beam which continues past the beam splitter module 121 is the output beam 120 of the laser, which propagates toward an industrial or experimental application such as an imaging system and workpiece for photolithographic applications.

The diagnostic module 118 preferably includes at least one energy detector. This detector measures the total energy of the beam portion that corresponds directly to the energy of the output beam 120 (see U.S. patents no. 4,611,270 and 6,212,214 which are hereby incorporated by reference). An optical configuration such as an optical attenuator, e.g., a plate or a coating, or other optics may be formed on or near the detector or beam splitter module 121 to control the intensity, spectral distribution and/or other parameters of the radiation impinging upon the detector (see U.S. patent applications no. 09/172,805, 09/741,465, 09/712,877, 09/771,013 and 09/771,366, each of which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application and is hereby incorporated by reference).

One other component of the diagnostic module 118 is preferably a wavelength and/or bandwidth detection component such as a monitor etalon or grating spectrometer, and a hollow cathode lamp or reference light source for providing absolute wavelength calibration of the monitor etalon or grating spectrometer (see U.S. patent applications no. 09/416,344, 09/686,483, and 09/791,431, each of which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application, and U.S. patents no. 4,905,243, 5,978,391, 5,450,207, 4,926,428, 5,748,346, 5,025,445, 6,160,832, 6,160,831, 6,269,110, 6,272,158 and 5,978,394, all of

the above wavelength and/or bandwidth detection and monitoring components being hereby incorporated by reference). The bandwidth and/or wavelength or other spectral, energy or other beam parameter may be monitored and controlled in a feedback loop including the processor 116 and optics control modules 110, 112, gas handling module 106, power supply and pulser modules 103, 104, or other laser system component modules. For example, the total pressure of the gas mixture in the laser tube 102 may be controlled to a particular value for producing an output beam at a particular bandwidth and/or energy. For the above mentioned calculation the correct sensitivity of the CCD camera or CCD array is important.

Other components of the diagnostic module may include a pulse shape detector or ASE detector, such as are described at U.S. patents no. 6,243,405 and 6,243,406 and U.S. patent application no. 09/842,281, which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application, each of which are hereby incorporated by reference, such as for gas control and/or output beam energy stabilization, or to monitor the amount of amplified spontaneous emission (ASE) within the beam to ensure that the ASE remains below a predetermined level. There may be a beam alignment monitor, e.g., such as is described at U.S. patent no. 6,014,206, or beam profile monitor, e.g., U.S. patent application no. 09/780,124, which is assigned to the same assignee, wherein each of these patent documents is hereby incorporated by reference.

BEAM PATH ENCLOSURE

Particularly for the molecular fluorine laser system, and also for the ArF and KrF laser systems, an enclosure (not shown) preferably seals the beam path of the beam 120 such as to keep the beam path free of photoabsorbing or other contaminant species that can tend to attenuate and/or otherwise disturb the beam such as by providing a varying refractive index along the optical path of the beam. Smaller enclosures preferably seal the beam path between the chamber 102 and the optics modules 110 and 112 and between the beam splitter 122 and

the diagnostic module 118 (see the 09/317,695, 09/594,892 and 09/598,552 applications, incorporated by reference above). The optics modules 110 and 112 are maintained in an atmosphere that is sufficiently evacuated or have an inert gas purged atmosphere. Preferred enclosures are described in detail in U.S. patent applications no. 09/598,552, 09/594,892, 09/727,600, 09/317,695 and 09/131,580, which are assigned to the same assignee and are hereby incorporated by reference, and U.S. patents no. 6,219,368, 5,559,584, 5,221,823, 5,763,855, 5,811,753 and 4,616,908, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

GAS MIXTURE

The laser gas mixture is initially filled into the laser chamber 102 in a process referred to herein as a "new fills". In such procedure, the laser tube is evacuated of laser gases and contaminants, and re-filled with an ideal gas composition of fresh gas. The gas composition for a very stable excimer or molecular fluorine laser in accord with the preferred embodiment uses helium or neon or a mixture of helium and neon as buffer gas(es), depending on the particular laser being used. Preferred gas compositions are described at U.S. patents no. 4,393,405, 6,157,162, 6,243,406 and 4,977,573 and U.S. patent applications no. 09/513,025, 09/447,882, 09/789,120 and 09/588,561, each of which is assigned to the same assignee and is hereby incorporated by reference into the present application. The concentration of the fluorine in the gas mixture may range from 0.003% to 1.00%, and is preferably around 0.1%. An additional gas additive, such as a rare gas or otherwise, may be added for increased energy stability, overshoot control and/or as an attenuator as described in the 09/513,025 application incorporated by reference above. Specifically, for the F₂-laser, an addition of xenon, krypton and/or argon may be used. The concentration of xenon or argon in the mixture may range from 0.0001% to 0.1%. For an ArF-laser, an addition of xenon or krypton may be used also having a

concentration between 0.0001% to 0.1%. For the KrF laser, an addition of xenon or argon may be used also having a concentration between 0.0001% to 0.1%. Gas replenishment actions are described below for gas mixture compositions of systems such as ArF, KrF, and XeCl excimer lasers and molecular fluorine lasers, wherein the ideas set forth herein may be advantageously incorporated into any of these systems, and other gas discharge laser systems.

GAS REPLENISHMENT

Halogen gas injections, including micro-halogen injections of, e.g., 1-3 milliliters of halogen gas, mixed with, e.g., 20-60 milliliters of buffer gas or a mixture of the halogen gas, the buffer gas and a active rare gas for rare gas-halide excimer lasers, per injection for a total gas volume in the laser tube 102 of, e.g., 100 liters, total pressure adjustments and gas replacement procedures may be performed using the gas handling module 106 preferably including a vacuum pump, a valve network and one or more gas compartments. The gas handling module 106 receives gas via gas lines connected to gas containers, tanks, canisters and/or bottles. Some preferred and alternative gas handling and/or replenishment procedures, other than as specifically described herein (see below), are described at U.S. patents no. 4,977,573, 6,212,214, 6,243,406 and 5,396,514 and U.S. patent applications no. 09/447,882, 09/734,459, 09/513,025 and 09/588,561, each of which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application, and U.S. patents no. 5,978,406, 6,014,398 and 6,028,880, all of which are hereby incorporated by reference. A xenon gas or other gas additive supply may be included either internal or external to the laser system according to the '025 application, mentioned above.

Total pressure adjustments in the form of releases of gases or reduction of the total pressure within the laser tube 102 may also be performed. Total pressure adjustments may be followed by gas composition adjustments if it is determined that, e.g., other than the desired partial pressure of halogen gas is within the laser tube 102 after the total pressure adjustment. Total pressure

adjustments may also be performed after gas replenishment actions, and may be performed in combination with smaller adjustments of the driving voltage to the discharge than would be made if no pressure adjustments were performed in combination.

Gas replacement procedures may be performed and may be referred to as partial, mini- or macro-gas replacement operations, or partial new fill operations, depending on the amount of gas replaced, e.g., anywhere from a few milliliters up to 50 liters or more, but less than a new fill, such as are set forth in the 09/734,459 application, incorporated by reference above. As an example, the gas handling unit 106 connected to the laser tube 102 either directly or through an additional valve assembly, such as may include a small compartment for regulating the amount of gas injected (see the '459 application), may include a gas line for injecting a premix A including 1%F₂:99%Ne or other buffer gas such as He, and another gas line for injecting a premix B including 1% rare gas:99% buffer gas, for a rare gas-halide excimer laser, wherein for a F₂ laser premix B is not used. Another line may be used for injecting a gas additive or gas additive premix, or a gas additive may be added to premix A, premix B or a buffer gas. Another line may be used for total pressure additions or reductions, i.e., for flowing buffer gas into the laser tube or allowing some of the gas mixture in the tube to be released, possibly accompanying halogen injections for maintaining the halogen concentration. Thus, by injecting premix A (and premix B for rare gas-halide excimer lasers) into the tube 102 via the valve assembly, the fluorine concentration in the laser tube 102 may be replenished. Then, a certain amount of gas may be released corresponding to the amount that was injected to maintain the total pressure at a selected level. Additional gas lines and/or valves may be used for injecting additional gas mixtures. New fills, partial and mini gas replacements and gas injection procedures, e.g., enhanced and ordinary micro-halogen injections, such as between 1 milliliter or less and 3-10 milliliters, or more depending on the degree of stability desired, and any and all other gas replenishment actions are initiated and controlled by the processor 116 which controls valve assemblies of the gas handling unit 106 and the laser tube

102 based on various input information in a feedback loop. These gas replenishment procedures may be used in combination with gas circulation loops and/or window replacement procedures to achieve a laser system having an increased servicing interval for both the gas mixture and the laser tube windows.

LINE NARROWING

A general description of the line-narrowing features of embodiments of the laser system particularly for use with photolithographic applications is provided here, followed by a listing of patent and patent applications being incorporated by reference as describing variations and features that may be used within the scope of the preferred embodiments herein for providing an output beam with a high spectral purity or bandwidth (e.g., below 1 pm and preferably 0.6 pm or less). These exemplary embodiments may be used along with the wavefront compensating optic 3, 13, 13 described above. For the F₂ laser, the optics may be used for selecting the primary line λ_1 only of multiple lines around 157 nm, or may be used to provide additional line narrowing as well as performing line-selection, or the resonator may include optics for line-selection and additional optics for line-narrowing of the selected line, and line-narrowing may be provided by controlling (i.e., reducing) the total pressure (see U.S. patent application no. 60/212,301, which is assigned to the same assignee and is hereby incorporated by reference). Line-narrowing of the broadband emission of the ArF and/or KrF lasers may be as set forth below.

Exemplary line-narrowing optics contained in the optics module 110 include a beam expander, an optional interferometric device such as an etalon or a device having a pair of opposed non-planar reflection plates such as may be described in the 09/715,803 or 60/280,398 applications, which are assigned to the same assignee as the present application and are hereby incorporated by reference, and a diffraction grating, and alternatively one or more dispersion prisms may be used, wherein the grating would produce a relatively higher degree of dispersion than the prisms although generally exhibiting somewhat

lower efficiency than the dispersion prism or prisms, for a narrow band laser such as is used with a refractive or catadioptric optical lithography imaging system. As mentioned above, the front optics module may include line-narrowing optics such as may be described in any of the 09/715,803, 09/738,849, and 09/718,809 applications, each being assigned to the same assignee and hereby incorporated by reference.

Instead of having a retro-reflective grating in the rear optics module 110, the grating may be replaced with a highly reflective mirror, and a lower degree of dispersion may be produced by a dispersive prism, or a beam expander and an interferometric device such as an etalon or device having non-planar opposed plates may be used for line-selection and narrowing, or alternatively no line-narrowing or line-selection may be performed in the rear optics module 110. In the case of using an all-reflective imaging system, the laser may be configured for semi-narrow band operation such as having an output beam linewidth in excess of 0.5 pm, depending on the characteristic broadband bandwidth of the laser, such that additional line-narrowing of the selected line would not be used, either provided by optics or by reducing the total pressure in the laser tube.

The beam expander of the above exemplary line-narrowing optics of the optics module 110 preferably includes one or more prisms. The beam expander may include other beam expanding optics such as a lens assembly or a converging/diverging lens pair. The grating or a highly reflective mirror is preferably rotatable so that the wavelengths reflected into the acceptance angle of the resonator can be selected or tuned. Alternatively, the grating, or other optic or optics, or the entire line-narrowing module may be pressure tuned, such as is set forth in the 09/771,366 application and the 6,154,470 patent, each of which is assigned to the same assignee and is hereby incorporated by reference. The grating may be used both for dispersing the beam for achieving narrow bandwidths and also preferably for retroreflecting the beam back toward the laser tube. Alternatively, a highly reflective mirror is positioned after the grating which receives a reflection from the grating and reflects the beam back toward the grating in a Littman configuration, or the grating may be a transmission grating.

One or more dispersive prisms may also be used, and more than one etalon or other interferometric device may be used.

Depending on the type and extent of line-narrowing and/or selection and tuning that is desired, and the particular laser that the line-narrowing optics are to be installed into, there are many alternative optical configurations that may be used. For this purpose, those shown in U.S. patents no. 4,399,540, 4,905,243, 5,226,050, 5,559,816, 5,659,419, 5,663,973, 5,761,236, 6,081,542, 6,061,382, 6,154,470, 5,946,337, 5,095,492, 5,684,822, 5,835,520, 5,852,627, 5,856,991, 5,898,725, 5,901,163, 5,917,849, 5,970,082, 5,404,366, 4,975,919, 5,142,543, 5,596,596, 5,802,094, 4,856,018, 5,970,082, 5,978,409, 5,999,318, 5,150,370 and 4,829,536, and German patent DE 298 22 090.3, and any of the patent applications mentioned above and below herein, may be consulted to obtain a line-narrowing configuration that may be used with a preferred laser system herein, and each of these patent references is each hereby incorporated by reference into the present application.

ADDITIONAL LASER SYSTEM FEATURES

Optics module 112 preferably includes means for outcoupling the beam 120, such as a partially reflective resonator reflector. The beam 120 may be otherwise outcoupled such as by an intra-resonator beam splitter or partially reflecting surface of another optical element, and the optics module 112 would in this case include a highly reflective mirror. The optics control module 114 preferably controls the optics modules 110 and 112 such as by receiving and interpreting signals from the processor 116, and initiating realignment, gas pressure adjustments in the modules 110, 112, or reconfiguration procedures (see the '353, '695, '277, '554, and '527 applications mentioned above).

The halogen concentration in the gas mixture is maintained constant during laser operation by gas replenishment actions by replenishing the amount of halogen in the laser tube for the preferred excimer or molecular fluorine laser herein, such that these gases are maintained in a same predetermined ratio as

are in the laser tube 102 following a new fill procedure. In addition, gas injection actions such as μ HIs as understood from the '882 application, mentioned above, may be advantageously modified into micro gas replacement procedures, such that the increase in energy of the output laser beam may be compensated by reducing the total pressure. In addition, the laser system is preferably configured for controlling the input driving voltage so that the energy of the output beam is at the predetermined desired energy. The driving voltage is preferably maintained within a small range around HV_{opt} , while the gas procedure operates to replenish the gases and maintain the average pulse energy or energy dose, such as by controlling an output rate of change of the gas mixture or a rate of gas flow through the laser tube 102. Advantageously, the gas procedures set forth herein permit the laser system to operate within a very small range around HV_{opt} , while still achieving average pulse energy control and gas replenishment, and increasing the gas mixture lifetime or time between new fills (see U.S. patent application no. 09/780,120, which is assigned to the same assignee as the present application and is hereby incorporated by reference).

In all of the above and below embodiments, the material used for any dispersive prisms, the prisms of any beam expanders, etalons or other interferometric devices, laser windows and the outcoupler is preferably one that is highly transparent at excimer or molecular fluorine laser wavelengths such as 248 nm for the KrF laser, 193 nm for the ArF laser and 157 nm for the F_2 laser. The materials are also capable of withstanding long-term exposure to ultraviolet light with minimal degradation effects. Examples of such materials are CaF_2 , MgF_2 , BaF_2 , LiF and SrF_2 , and in some cases fluorine-doped quartz may be used, and for the KrF laser, fused silica may be used. Also, in all of the embodiments, many optical surfaces, particularly those of the prisms, may or may not have an anti-reflective coating on one or more optical surfaces, in order to minimize reflection losses and prolong their lifetime.

Also, the gas composition for the excimer or molecular fluorine laser in the above configurations uses either helium, neon, or a mixture of helium and neon as a buffer gas. For rare gas-halide excimer lasers, the rare gas is preferably

maintained at a concentration of around 1.0% in the gas mixture. The concentration of fluorine in the gas mixture preferably ranges from 0.003% to around 1.0%, and is preferably around 0.1%. However, if the total pressure is reduced for narrowing the bandwidth, then the fluorine concentration may be higher than 0.1%, such as may be maintained between 1 and 7 mbar, and more preferably around 3-5 mbar, notwithstanding the total pressure in the tube or the percentage concentration of the halogen in the gas mixture. The addition of a trace amount of xenon, and/or argon, and /or oxygen, and/or krypton and/or other gases (see the '025 application) may be used for increasing the energy stability, burst control, and/or output energy of the laser beam. The concentration of xenon, argon, oxygen, or krypton in the mixture as a gas additive may range from 0.0001% to 0.1%, and would be preferably significantly below 0.1%. Some alternative gas configurations including trace gas additives are set forth at U.S. patent application no. 09/513,025 and U.S. patent no. 6,157,662, each of which is assigned to the same assignee and is hereby incorporated by reference.

A line-narrowed oscillator, e.g., a set forth above, may be followed by a power amplifier for increasing the power of the beam output by the oscillator. Preferred features of the oscillator-amplifier set-up are set forth at U.S. patent applications no. 09/599,130 and 60/228,184, which are assigned to the same assignee and are hereby incorporated by reference. The amplifier may be the same or a separate discharge chamber 102. An optical or electrical delay may be used to time the electrical discharge at the amplifier with the reaching of the optical pulse from the oscillator at the amplifier. With particular respect to the F₂-laser, a molecular fluorine laser oscillator may have an advantageous output coupler having a transmission interference maximum at λ_1 and a minimum at λ_2 . A 157 nm beam is output from the output coupler and is incident at the amplifier of this embodiment to increase the power of the beam. Thus, a very narrow bandwidth beam is achieved with high suppression of the secondary line λ_2 and high power (at least several Watts to more than 10 Watts).

While exemplary drawings and specific embodiments of the present invention have been described and illustrated, it is to be understood that that the scope of

the present invention is not to be limited to the particular embodiments discussed. Thus, the embodiments shall be regarded as illustrative rather than restrictive, and it should be understood that variations may be made in those embodiments by workers skilled in the arts without departing from the scope of the present invention as set forth in the claims that follow, and equivalents thereof.